



***Nyssa sylvatica* (Sour Gum)**

Identification

- **Common names:** Black gum, Black tupelo, Pepperidge, Sour gum
- **Scientific name:** *Nyssa sylvatica*
- **Family:** Nyssaceae

Description

- **Form:** Medium-sized deciduous tree, often 30–50 ft tall but can grow taller. It has a straight trunk and a pyramidal or oval crown when young, becoming more irregular with age.
- **Leaves:** Simple, alternate, and oval with smooth or slightly wavy margins. In fall, the leaves turn brilliant shades of red, orange, yellow, and purple, making it one of the most colorful native trees.
- **Flowers:** Small, greenish-white, and not very showy, appearing in late spring. They provide nectar for pollinators, especially bees.
- **Fruit:** Small, oval, dark-blue drupes (berries), very attractive to birds and other wildlife.

Native Range

- Native to eastern North America, from Maine and Ontario south to Florida and Texas.

Ecological Importance

- Provides food for wildlife: fruits are eaten by birds, bears, foxes, and raccoons.
- Nectar is a key source for bees (tupelo honey is highly prized).
- Its dense wood provides habitat for cavity-nesting birds.

Human Uses

- Ornamental: planted for its spectacular fall foliage.
- Wood: tough and resistant to wear, used for crates, pallets, and sometimes furniture.
- Honey: Tupelo honey from *Nyssa* species is sought after for its unique flavor and resistance to crystallization.

Grasses (foreground, planted in rows)

Bunch-forming native grasses, commonly used in restoration and naturalized plantings:

- **Schizachyrium scoparium (Little Bluestem)**
 - Upright, tufted bunchgrass, 2–4 ft tall.
 - Blue-green summer foliage, turning coppery-red in fall.
 - Excellent for pollinators and as larval host for skipper butterflies.
 - Provides winter cover for birds and small mammals.
 - Could also include **Panicum virgatum (Switchgrass)** or **Deschampsia flexuosa (Tufted Hairgrass)** depending on soil and site conditions, but the neat row planting and clumping form looks most like **Little Bluestem**.
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Shrubs (midground, green mound-like forms)

These low, dense shrubs appear to form a hedge-like mass:

- **Likely species:**
 - **Morella pensylvanica (Northern Bayberry)**
 - Common coastal native shrub, semi-evergreen.
 - Grows 5–10 ft tall, aromatic foliage, gray waxy berries (important for birds, especially tree swallows and yellow-rumped warblers).
 - Salt- and drought-tolerant, excellent for sandy soils.
 - Could also be **Ilex glabra (Inkberry Holly)**, another common use in native plantings, but bayberry is more typical in coastal meadow edges like this.
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✓ Summary:

- **Tree:** *Nyssa sylvatica* (Sour Gum) – wildlife food + brilliant fall color.
- **Grasses:** Most likely **Little Bluestem**, adding texture, habitat, and fall/winter interest.
- **Shrubs:** Most likely **Northern Bayberry**, providing dense cover and bird food.